

Mysteries Lurking in the Everyday:

A Translation of Two Short Stories by Miyabe Miyuki

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a translation of two short stories by popular Japanese fiction writer Miyabe Miyuki, whose naturalistic style and supernatural flair hint at “the mysteries lurking in the everyday.” The two stories, “The Ten-Year Plan” (1993) and “Bygones” (1994), are provided with an introduction and with translation notes where appropriate.

Dedication

For Sean, who always believed in me
and Pete, who was good for it at least 80% of the time

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Introduction

Miyabe Miyuki was born Yabe Miyuki on December 23, 1960. The fourth generation of the Yabe family to live in the working-class neighborhood of Fukagawa in Tokyo, Miyabe grew up sharing a household with as many as nineteen members of her extended family, including her father, a skilled factory worker, and her mother, a seamstress. After graduating from high school, she entered a technical college for shorthand and eventually received qualification to be an official stenographer. Working in a law office by day and transcribing tape recordings by night, Miyabe started writing when, at age twenty-three, she took a night course in popular fiction writing sponsored by the Kōdansha publishing company and taught by popular mystery writer Yamamura Masao. In 1987 two short stories she had submitted to literary periodicals—"Warera ga rinjin no hanzai" (Our neighbors' crimes) and "Kamaitachi" (The wind cuts like a scythe)—won her awards and recognition as a new author, and after her full-length novel *Majutsu wa sasayuku* (The Devil's Whisper) earned The Japan Mystery/Suspense Award, Miyabe quit her day job and part-time work to devote her time to writing. In all, she has published sixty books to date, including her 1998 novel *Riyū* (Reasons), the winner of the prestigious Naoki Prize for popular literature by a rising young author.¹

¹ Noriko Chino, "Miyabe Miyuki's Place in the Development of Japanese Mystery Fiction" (Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2008), 78-81.

An understanding of Miyabe's background is critical to appreciating what makes her work unique. As a working-class Tokyo native with no formal post-secondary education and years of experience in transcription, Miyabe draws her greatest influence as a writer not from an academic study of any given author or literary movement, but rather from her deep immersion in downtown Tokyo and the dialect of its inhabitants. Her style owes considerably more to oral tradition than to "serious" literature. This is not to say that Miyabe's work is without substance; indeed, her social consciousness is writ large in her stories, and their plots often integrally involve contemporary problems such as freelance prostitution, predatory lending, and the fallout of the bubble economy. But Miyabe's foremost aim is not to sermonize or to scaremonger; it is to deliver a suspenseful, engaging story that rings true to life. It is as exemplars of this aim that the following two short stories, "The Ten-Year Plan" (1993) and "Bygones," (1994) are presented.

In his brief commentary accompanying the 2001 short story compilation in which it appears, Nishigami Shinta describes "The Ten-Year Plan" by saying, "Although not a ghost story, it has the savor of one heard by candlelight at a gathering of one hundred tales."¹ Miyabe's evocation of the oral storytelling tradition is quite deliberate here; by opening with "This is a story I heard from someone," she evinces the universal second-hand tone of the urban legend. That the story takes place in an automobile at night only strengthens its participation in the trope. "The Ten-Year Plan" is lent a certain cinematic

¹ *Hyakumonogatari kaidenkai*, a popular parlor game from the Edo period (1603-1868) in which participants light a hundred candles and tell a hundred scary stories, snuffing a candle after each one. The lore has it that when the last candle is extinguished, a spirit will appear.

weight and vividness by the inclusion of what is effectively a soundtrack: the specific mention of “Strangers in the Night” and “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue.” In the story, the ballad Frank Sinatra made famous in 1966 begins to play the moment the narrator asks the taxi driver if her claim that she got her driver’s license because she wanted to kill someone is true. The synchronization of this suspenseful and crucial moment with the beginning of such a mellow, soothing song seems briefly ironic, but as the narrator begins to bond with the driver the lyrics start to describe their relationship—“strangers in the night, two lonely people”—and by the time she is considering whether or not the driver’s murderous plot was a good idea the song appears to have burrowed its way into her mind, where Sinatra’s voice can be heard. More immediately apropos in the eyes of the narrator is “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue,” the song that starts to play just as she remarks that a traffic “accident” would lead to the police turning up the driver’s relationship with her late victim: it strikes her as “too perfect.” The instrumental cover of the song by surf rock band The Ventures, which was released in 1964 and is likely the one referenced here, has a certain upbeat zaniness to it befitting a scheme like the one described, but more fitting still is the story associated with it: the original was written as a score for a ballet within the 1936 musical *On Your Toes* that related the story of a fatal love triangle in which a jealous lover murders his girlfriend, only to be murdered in turn by another man in love with her. This intertextual reference resembles that used by directors in their film scores all the time, reminding the reader that Miyabe is most strongly influenced not by literature but by other media, including cinema. Furthermore, the deliberate choice of music that was, at the time the story was written, some thirty years old serves as an

auditory link to the past, a way into the mind of the taxi driver as a young woman of twenty.

Unfortunately, Miyabe's decision to set the framed narrative thirty years ago—the very decision that allows her to so efficiently paint a picture of that time with only a few strokes—also somewhat removes the immediacy of the social ill the story treats, that is, the ongoing fight for equal opportunities and treatment for women in the workplace. By both characters' admissions this is a story of some thirty years ago, and while the narrator remarks that even now it is not unheard of for a woman to be forced to quit her job after a failed relationship with a coworker, most of the hardships faced by the taxi driver—her inability to find work as a driver, for example—no longer obtain in the present day. Arguably Miyabe could be attempting to draw attention to fields where women are still not considered equal, but without gesturing at what those fields might be it is difficult to say for sure; generally her social commentary takes on more of the characteristics of a persistent undertone than a cursory gesture at the problem.

Of the two, "Bygones" is more quintessentially Miyabe-esque in its character and execution. Its opening reference to ghosts is not unusual for a writer who often deals in the fantastic and supernatural, and the reader likely entertains the possibility that the young man Mr. Seta, the narrator, encounters on a train on the Chūō Rapid line is a shade or supernatural entity for some time. The native audience may more so anticipate that something gruesome has or shortly will befall the young man, as this particular line is infamous for suicides due to how quickly it passes by certain stations not on its route, such as Iidabashi, which is mentioned as the first place on the route that Seta notices the "ghost." It is easy to forget in light of the long intervening flashback, but the entire story

takes place over about one and a half miles of the Chūō line, including at Shinjuku Station; it is typical for Miyabe to take advantage of her personal background and set her stories in the heart of Tokyo, as it is the area with which she is most intimately familiar, and with “Bygones” she does not disappoint.

Unlike the decades-old social concern aired in “The Ten-Year Plan,” the severe bullying present in Japanese schools that drives the plot of “Bygones” was and continues to be a hot-button issue. In 1994, the same year the story was first published, a survey by the Ministry of Education reported that 58.4% of all middle schools reported serious bullying incidents. Some such incidents greatly resemble the torments described by the boy in Miyabe’s story:

One fifteen-year-old victim in Nagoya, repeatedly tortured with lit cigarettes and beaten so badly by his classmates that he was twice hospitalized, ended up forking over more than a half million dollars to his tormentors. In another case, six teenagers in Tokyo were arrested for blackmailing some 500,000 yen, or nearly \$5000, out of a fourteen-year-old boy[.]

As the boy seems to have done in “Bygones,” many reported victims of bullying extorted by their classmates simply stole the demanded sum from their parents—evidence, perhaps, that the boy’s oblivious parents are more “normal” than the narrator Seta gives them credit for being.² Certainly a native audience would have no trouble calling to mind images of similar incidents that had been reported in the news, as Seta mentioned.

² Michael Zielenziger, *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2006), 51-2.

Such images, however, are not the only ones Miyabe intends to conjure in the minds of her audience. Just as “The Ten-Year Plan” invokes the cinema with its use of a soundtrack, “Bygones” invites comparison with film by co-opting its aesthetic, particularly that of the *film noir* genre. Like the quintessential *film noir*, the entirety of “Bygones” takes place in the rain; its introspective and insightful narrator is, of course, a private investigator, and his story ultimately begins when “an unusual prospective client” pays his office a visit. The client’s disappearance spurs Seta into an obsessive three-month-long search that eventually drives him to seek guidance from a hardboiled police sergeant who, as he is depicted, may as well be the patron saint of *film noir* itself: a low growl of a voice and the flick of an unseen cigarette lighter on the other end of a phone.

Such is Miyabe’s skill in painting detailed mental images in the reader’s mind with only a few short strokes that it creates the impression of a crisp, stark film; this effect is achieved in no small part due to her easy prose and naturalistic dialogue. The reader is thereby drawn into her suspenseful tales, only to be startled out of that absorption by their anticlimactic conclusions: the absence of a murder in “The Ten-Year Plan” and a final confrontation in “Bygones.” This may seem disappointing at first reading; in these stories, however, Miyabe’s interest is not in crafting an unusual or complicated plot, but rather in exposing some of the mysteries that can be found in everyday occurrences. It is these “mysteries lurking in the everyday” that are the subject of the following two stories.

“The Ten-Year Plan”

This is a story I heard from someone.

That someone was a woman somewhere in her mid-forties. She was plump. She had a loud, lively voice that seemed to bounce off the walls. And she was constantly chattering—the type who gets cast as an extra in serial TV dramas, the “gossipy local housewife.”

She and I had the chance to be alone together for just under an hour, and I was audience to what she called “something like my life story.” It was late, just past two in the morning, and a steady stream of golden oldies was flowing from her radio. It seemed like the kind of station that just played music, without any radio personalities yakking away.

She addressed me first—asked me if I had a driver’s license. “Sadly, no,” I answered. “My reflexes are bad, so I’ve given up on it. If I got my license, I’d be a public menace.” She laughed loudly.

“Once you have your license, you find out it’s not that bad.”

“Really?”

“It’s true, you know,” she said, nodding broadly. “You might discover a whole new side of yourself.”

“Who knows? I might turn out to be a real hot-rodder.”

“They do say there are people whose personalities totally change once they’re behind the wheel, and there certainly are. But do young people like you still use old-fashioned words like ‘hot-rodder?’”

“I’m not that young.”

“Oh! Well, then, let’s not talk about age.”

Her features softened into a cheerful expression. I couldn’t catch more than a glimpse of her face, but it was obvious to me that she was enjoying the conversation. I myself—even though I was a bit tired—felt that exchanging pleasantries was far more interesting than staring into space in boredom. I’ve always been the kind of person who likes listening to the stories of strangers. And as temporary conversation partners go, she aroused my interest. So when she broached the subject of driver’s licenses, it wasn’t with feigned but with real interest that I listened to her.

“I’m something of an oddity for my generation because I got my driver’s license when I was still young.”

“How old were you?”

“It was my second year of work after I left high school. That means I was twenty.” When I thought about it, this did seem quite strange for a woman of her generation. “That’d be some thirty years ago now,” she continued.

Oh, I thought, and made a minor adjustment to my previous estimation. She didn’t look her age.

“You know, at first, I didn’t think I had any need for a driver’s license. I didn’t think I was cut out for it, either. And if you think your reflexes are bad, mine were really awful.”

“Women think nothing of getting their licenses these days—not like thirty years ago.”

She nodded slightly. Again, her features softened. “Absolutely. These days they’re getting them as soon as they’re out of high school. My own daughter says she wants to get hers.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s a senior in high school.¹ A hopeless tomboy. She’s graduating next spring, and she’s determined to go to driver’s ed once she does. Right now she’s working part-time to pay for it. But she says that until she gets used to driving, she’s going to borrow my car.”

“But that would probably put your mind at ease.”

“You’re right. It’s better than letting her drive around in some cheap rental car that hasn’t been maintained in God only knows how long, or in a used car she bought off a friend on the cheap.” Her words revealed her motherly concern.

“But I’ve gotten off topic,” she said, continuing. “Anyway, when I was twenty, I suddenly decided to get my license. I mean really suddenly. Before then I hadn’t even given it a thought. Why all of a sudden like that, do you suppose?”

“Well,” I said, and laughed. “Maybe you had a crush on the driver’s ed teacher.”

She grinned too. “This isn’t that kind of story.”

¹ A third-year student in high school. The equivalent of our seventh, eighth, and ninth grades are considered part of middle school; high school is the equivalent of our tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades.

Just then, the slow-tempo ballad that had been coming from her radio ended. In the brief moment of dead air before the start of the next song, her words fell like a ton of bricks.

“You see, I wanted to kill somebody, so I decided to get my driver’s license.”

For a moment I was dumbstruck. I think my face was still stuck in a smile. “Is that a true story?” I asked as the radio began to play the next song. It was Frank Sinatra’s “Strangers in the Night.”

“It’s true, it’s true; I’m not lying to you.” She tilted her head thoughtfully and looked back at me, nodding firmly. “But it’s ancient history.”

“You really gave me a scare,” I said, laughing. “Have you told this story before?”

“A few times. When I’ve felt like it.”

“I bet they’re all shocked when they hear it, aren’t they?”

“There was one guy who said it was a good idea, you know. Although I’m sure there’s some bad karma in store for him.” While listening to Sinatra’s voice in a corner of my mind, I pondered that. A good idea....

“So you mean you were thinking of getting your driver’s license and staging a traffic accident in order to kill somebody?”

“We have a winner!” she declared cheerfully. At that, I felt relieved. It really was an old story, and she herself seemed to find it funny. There was still a whiff of violence about it, but I thought at least that there was no real malice or hatred in what she was saying.

“Way back then, you know, when I was twenty, I was in dire straits.” The tone of her voice dropped—a key change. Here there was a sudden reverence for the past, and

she struck a chord of sadness. “To put it bluntly, I had a failed relationship, and because of it I lost my job. He was a fellow employee, so in the end I couldn’t stay on there.”

“I understand, I understand.”

“You see that kind of thing even now, don’t you?”

“Yes. It’s an uncomfortable reality.”

“It’s always that way, isn’t it? But you know, this was a long time ago, so it wasn’t just a matter of hurt feelings. Things were a lot more unequal in those days. The company had a policy forbidding relationships between coworkers. So the moment the scandal broke, I was fired. But the man didn’t have to quit.”

“Why not? That’s hardly fair.”

She shrugged her broad shoulders. “He’d agreed to an arranged marriage proposed by our boss. And because of that, he dumped me.”

“How awful,” I said, raising my voice. “So they got rid of the nuisance, huh?”

“That’s it, you’re right. But there was more to it than that—”

It was probably because these were such bitter memories that it took her a while to recover. “Okay,” she said, and there was a substantial pause before she began again. “He—my boyfriend at the time—had his reasons for wanting to agree to the boss’s arranged marriage. So in order to ‘take care’ of me, he tipped the boss off to our relationship. He told him that we were involved. But he said that it wasn’t serious, and that, to tell the truth, he was bothered by how I followed him around. That he’d told me he couldn’t violate company policy and had tried to turn me down any number of times.”

If it happened the way she said it did, it was an appallingly selfish thing to do. But then again, things like that do happen. In this world, anything is possible. I was old enough to understand that much.

“In the end, I was much better off not being involved with a man like that.”

“Definitely. It was for the best.”

“But at the time, I was miserable. One day, all of a sudden, the boss called me into his office and told me, ‘You’re in violation of company policy, you know.’ After that, I only got a month’s notice before they gave me the axe.”

“My God, ‘betrayal’ doesn’t begin to cover it.” It had happened to a complete stranger, but I found myself getting angry. “But how did your boss find out about it in the first place? Surely not from the man himself?”

“Actually, yes.”

By now I was really aghast. “Could he really have been that despicable?”

“Some men are, you know,” she said, laughing cheerfully. Her good humor didn’t seem to be a front for any kind of continued resentment. Probably the passing of time had given her such wisdom, strength, and resilience.

“What did he say?”

Her answer came with an understandably sarcastic smile. “He said he was sure I’d understand. ‘If you really love me,’ he said, ‘you’ll want what’s best for me. I believe you’ll break things off cleanly.’”²

I burst out laughing. She kept laughing, too. “Well, that’s the kind of man he was. And I was pretty foolish myself.”

² His implication was that she should not come looking for any *tegirikin*, or consolation money customarily paid to women after a break-up.

“But with a man like that, wanting to kill him isn’t unreasonable, you know. Anyone would feel that way.”

“Well, if it were you, what would you do?”

“How would I kill him, you mean?”

“Yes. Would you do it boldly, without trying to hide it? After all, you would certainly have reason enough to do it, after all he’d done. So would you just go ahead and do it, and expect people to recognize your right to act?”

I thought about that for a while. I wasn’t the kind of person who could out and say, “Yeah, I’d kill him on the spot.” I thought I would never be able to kill someone with such disregard for the consequences.³

“No, that’d be no good. I couldn’t do it like that. Become a criminal on account of a man like that? No thanks.”

“That’s what I thought, too. So I thought I’d do it by faking a traffic accident. That way, even if it were a fatal accident, it’d still be an ‘accident,’ right?”

“But wait a minute.” As I spoke, the music coming from the radio changed to “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue.” Somehow it was too perfect. “There’s a flaw in that plan. No matter how much it looks like an accident, when someone gets killed, the police are bound to investigate this and that as a formality, right? With just a little digging, they’d be sure to find out about the relationship between you and the man you ran over. At that point, they wouldn’t treat it like any old accident.”

“That’s why,” she said, perfectly matter-of-fact, “I’d planned to wait at least ten years to do it.”

³ *Jibakuteki na satsujin*, or “self-destructive murder,” in the original. *Jibaku* can refer to suicide bombings.

“Ten years—”

“Yes. Until the trail had gone cold.”

“But after ten years, even if the trail had cooled off by then, you would have, too, don’t you think?” I thought most people would. If not, then everyone who’d ever been disappointed in love would be throwing their lives away on revenge.

“Even if decades passed, I thought I’d never lose my will to kill him—just like a twenty-year-old girl to think that way,” she said. “I was totally convinced. It’s not that I was planning on living off desire for vengeance alone; I thought that if I could just recover from this, I could make a good life for myself. But rationally, I couldn’t bring myself to forgive him for what he’d done. I just couldn’t forgive him, no matter what. So I felt I could wait.”

I could understand that feeling. But even given that, she’d laid some far-reaching plans indeed.

“Sometimes I thought that waiting ten years would be painful.” Her tone was sober. Now there was no trace of laughter in her voice. “I didn’t think I could live in the same world and breathe the same air as such a horrible human being for ten long years. Maybe five years—no, even three years—would be enough? At my most impatient, I thought I would do it the moment I got my license. I knew where he lived, and I had learned his daily routine. And as for an explanation, why, there were any number of them I could supply. For example, something like this: I’d say that I just wanted to get together with him so badly, and that when I drove out to meet him, I happened to see him on his way home from the office, so I thought I might call out to him, but I was so

nervous that I ended up stepping on the gas instead of the brakes. I've only had my license for a week, I'd say. I'm still so new to driving—”

I groaned out loud and folded my arms across my chest. “I don't think that excuse would work.”

“Probably not, right? I figured as much, so I gave up on that one and decided to wait ten years.”

“You went back to your long-term plan?”

“Exactly,” she said, and she laughed. She'd gone back to the same kind of cheerful laughter she'd exhibited at the start of her story. “Ten years passed in no time at all,” she murmured, and it was as if I could see her turning the pages of an album in her mind. Even with the passing of time, the photographs had not yellowed at all; not a single speck of dust clung to these mementos. “I had a little bit in savings so right after I was fired, I went into driver's ed—the instructor was a real bastard, and that was tough, but at any rate I got my license without any real trouble. But after that, there was a big problem.”

“A big problem?”

“Yes. The circumstances were not my fault, but for outward appearances I had definitely been fired for breaking company rules. It was hard to find work after that.”

“I see....”

“I was a real worry for my parents, and life was hard. My family wasn't the kind that could support an adult daughter, out of school, lying around the house and doing

nothing, so I felt like a burden. I was miserable. At one point I even thought about going into less reputable lines of work.”⁴

It struck me that this really was a story from thirty years ago. These days, there’s any number of jobs for a girl in her twenties. A woman looking for a part-time job just to tide herself over could find something immediately.

“If I had my license and couldn’t get my hands on a car in six months, or a year, I’d forget how to drive. So I looked for work where I could put my driving skills to use. But in those days, all of those jobs—all of them—were taken by men. There was just no space for a woman to get into that line of work.”

“That’s right,” I said, nodding slowly. “Times have changed, haven’t they?”

“They certainly have.” After a moment of silence, she continued. “For a time, because of my unemployment, I resigned myself to despair, but then out of the blue I had a stroke of luck. Bad luck, maybe, but luck all the same.”

“You found work?”

“Yes, as a live-in maid.”

I felt a twinge of sympathy. There’s no shame in making a living. But for a twenty-year-old girl to go from having been an office lady, one of the best positions a woman could get in those days, to suddenly finding herself employed as a maid must have been painful.

“I was grateful, you know. I’m sure you’re wondering why. But while I worked there, they let me drive. That is, while I was working as a maid, I was also the driver for the lady of the house. They were the kind of household that only had imported cars—

⁴ *Mizushōbai*, a word easy to understand but hard to translate, can denote waitressing at a bar, working as a prostitute, and everything in between.

three of them. They had already hired a driver for her husband. But having just the one driver had gotten to be a little inconvenient—when she went to the beauty salon, say, or ran some other errand. So they trained me to be a driver.”

She told me that, for the first six months, she worked as a maid during the day, and at night, with the husband’s driver as her instructor, she drove around the neighborhood, gradually gaining experience.

“The first time I drove the lady of the house by myself, I was so nervous I was soaked with sweat. They lived in the neighborhood of the Chinzansō,⁵ and it only took about thirty minutes to get from there to Mejiro Station.”

“You worked in a rich neighborhood like that? That’s wonderful.”

“I thought I was pretty cute, too, back then.” It seemed like, even now, the twenty-year-old girl she once was still lived inside her mind, and she had great affection for that girl. It was exactly the same kind of affection she had for her own high-school-aged daughter. Suddenly, I felt jealous of her. When I get to be her age, could I still feel that affection for my younger self?

“At the time I was forming my long-term plan,” she said, continuing. “And it wouldn’t work unless I became a really skillful driver. Running someone over is one thing, but trying to do it on purpose isn’t easy. So I really had to make my driving technique second nature.”

“That makes sense. Your target was a living human being, after all.”

“That, and when I went to set my plan into motion—to cause a fatal accident—I would want there to be as many extenuating circumstances as possible. Either way it’d

⁵ In English, its official name is the Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Chinzan-so. Readers can see how fancy it is for themselves at <http://www.fourseasons.com/tokyo/>.

be a risk, but the thought of going to prison⁶ didn't appeal to me. So to make sure I was treated leniently, I would have to have a spotless driving record before the incident."

"I see."

It really was an incredible plan; she was obviously quite bright. She had thought of everything.

"One more thing: I needed to save up some money. After all, if you kill someone in an accident, you have to pay some compensation. Depending on how it happened, you might be able to whittle down the amount, but either way it'd still be a lot of money. And if I didn't have it, it'd mean trouble for my family and my employers."

"You were planning on paying compensation?"

"Of course. In the case of an accident, it's what's expected."

"But didn't you think that was kind of ridiculous? What with your target being the kind of man that he was."

"Killing him would make life hard for his family. If I didn't compensate them somehow, I'd lose sleep over it."

I was impressed, but for the first time I also felt a shiver of fear. This kind of lingering anger and cold calculation of all possibilities, this malice aforethought, was truly terrifying—more so than any crime of passion.

"I really worked hard at it." Unconcerned about what I might be thinking, she continued her story. "After five years, I'd become quite a skillful driver. But then, young lady, you never know what fate has in store. I got married."

"Oh!"

⁶ Japan has separate prisons set aside for traffic offenders, the most famous of which is Ichihara Prison in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

“To the husband’s driver, the one I mentioned earlier.”

She had tied the knot with her personal driving instructor.

“Even after we got married, we still worked in the same household. They were good people—the husband and his wife.”

“How long did you work there?”

“Just ten years,” she replied. “After that, the husband’s company went under. If I had to say, they probably went bankrupt. And they lost everything—their estate and their employees.”

“What did you and your husband do?”

“For the time being, I quit working. My husband found another job, and by that time we had a kid and all my time was taken up raising him.” She suddenly laughed brightly. “You want to know what happened?”

“Of course I do.” What on earth had become of her long term plan?

“I was so busy that I totally forgot about my ten-year plan. To be honest, once I got married it completely slipped my mind.”

I felt relieved. And it must have shown on my face—but that was all right. “I thought as much.”

“Really?”

“Well, if you’d really gone through with you ten-year plan, there’s no way you could be in this line of work now, right?”

“You’re right about that,” she said, laughing and tapping the white cap that she wore on her head at a jaunty angle. On the bill was the name of her company: “Sakura Taxi, Inc.” Times had changed. Thirty years ago, it would have seemed unreal; I would

never have believed I could be riding around in a taxi cab, late at night, with a female driver at the wheel.

But it was strange, I thought. I'm the kind of person who talks to taxi drivers a lot, and when I do I always address them as "driver," but when the driver was a woman, I couldn't bring myself to do that. Maybe it was just my personal hang-up, but I had great difficulty calling her "driver."⁷ I guess that's starting to change, too, these days.

"Does your husband work for the same company?"

"No. He works elsewhere. Sakura Taxi's president is a woman, you see. She's trying to hire female drivers like me and make it a selling point for the company."

She said she'd started working there once her eldest son graduated from high school.

"It was about that time that we built our house, and I couldn't make my husband take on that debt all by himself. And that daughter in high school I mentioned earlier was starting to complain that having her mom at home all the time was annoying her and it'd be better for her if I worked, or something to that effect."

"It must be a nice house."

"The wood trim in the guest room is real Japanese cypress," she said triumphantly, and she puffed herself up with pride—even from the back seat I could sense her expression. "It was our dream to have a house like that."

Without my noticing, the scenery outside the car window had become that of the neighborhood I knew so well. I was so absorbed in her story that on the way we hadn't

⁷ *Untenshu-san*, or "Mr(s). Driver." The term itself is gender neutral, but despite this, it appears the narrator's mental image of an *untenshu-san* is male. Compare to an older American being unlikely to address a woman physician as simply "Doctor."

discussed the route at all, but with only the address I'd given her when I got into the cab to go on, she brought me right to my own block.

She really was good at her job. What a pro.

"It's not much farther now."

"Yes. Turn left at the next corner, please. It's right there."

The car rounded the corner smoothly, and before long it stopped in front of my house. The porch light was already off.

"You're getting home quite late, aren't you, young lady?"

I answered her playfully. "My family's used to it by now."

"Well!"

"I paid my fare and took my change, and while the meter was printing my receipt, she spoke, her tone that of a saleslady giving something away gratis.

"I picked him up once, you know."

"Who?" I asked, realizing afterward that it was a stupid question. Who else could she mean?

She was smiling wordlessly. She had turned to face me, and for the first time I could see her features straight on. Aside from the prominent beauty mark under her left eye, there was nothing noteworthy about her face; she was just a typical middle-aged woman. In another twenty years I would probably look like that, too.

"When was that?"

"At least a year ago or so now."

"Did you recognize him right away?"

"The moment I saw him."

“It’s a small world, isn’t it?”

“And one with a strange sense of humor,” she said. “But if I’d never met him to start with, I wouldn’t be who I am now. So maybe I’m better off having known him after all. I got a pretty good life out of it.”

You mean you made a good life out of it, I thought to myself. “Did he realize who you were?”

“No, not at all.”

“He didn’t have a clue?”

“No, he didn’t see my face. And anyway, when he knew me, I wasn’t much older than my daughter is now. Maybe he still expected me to look like that.”

She laughed, and I did too. We both knew who we were laughing at.

“Here you go. Sorry to have kept you waiting.” She tore off the printed receipt and passed it to me. “Good night,” she said as she opened the automatic door.

“Good night,” I replied.

How did she feel when she picked him up? How had he weathered the intervening years, and what kind of man had he become in his fifties? At that moment I wanted to ask her, but not enough to actually do it. Her driving ability, and the look of calm on her face, were answer enough, I thought.

I don’t usually do this, but as I put my hand on my front door I turned to watch her car drive away. Its red taillights shone proudly as it headed back to the city and into the night. She really was a pro.

I wrote this story down without her permission. I doubt it will catch her attention directly, but the world is smaller than it seems. To those who are reading this: maybe someday, somewhere, you might happen to catch a ride in her cab.

If, when you do, she starts to tell you this story, please don't say, "Oh, I've heard this one before." I want you to listen to the end. The story you'll hear from her, in her own words, with her favorite radio station playing nothing but golden oldies in the background, will leave a far greater impression in your mind than these amateurish sentences.

I can promise you that much.

“Bygones”

Chapter 1:

They say a horde of ghosts live in this city. Even in death they harbor an attachment to its streets; they yearn for everyday life in the city, for the chance to endure the confusion, noise, and clamor that goes along with the high prices, the crowded trains, and even the search for pleasure. The myriad souls, adrift, unable to leave these worldly desires, haunt their alleys between high rises and the station crowds.

For better or for worse, I have yet to encounter any such ghosts. But I have encountered “the past.” If the souls of those who have not died can be called ghosts, then “the past” can be said to be the ghost of time that has not yet passed away, taking the form of a memory.

I met him by chance in a car on the Chūō line. It was a Thursday, a little past six o’clock in the afternoon, and the inside of the train was packed, as always. Since it was the rainy season, the air in the car was already muggy and damp, and even though the air conditioning was working the passengers all smelled of sweat.

Usually, after leaving my office for the day, I take the train from Kanda Station. Today, however, because I happened to feel so inclined, I took a leisurely stroll, browsing the stalls in front of the used book stores before climbing the hill to Ochanomizu. This was purely on a whim, but that day was not the first time I’d indulged it. I am a lazy reader, but I like to buy books. Among my purchases, therefore, are mixed in two kinds

of works: technical books of the sort that are totally incomprehensible to the layman on a first reading and, conversely, picture books for the children. I suppose it would be better to say that these miscellaneous tomes are the only sorts of books I prefer to collect.

I have been told it is a peculiar hobby. On a previous excursion, I had found a used book dealer specializing in children's books, and finding they had some books that struck my fancy, I bought an armload of them to carry back to the office. When I got back, the office girls psychoanalyzed me: "Deep down, Mr. Seta wants a child—that's why he buys these children's books."

It's true that, despite our nearly twenty years of marriage, my wife and I have no children. There have been times when I've felt some sadness over that. I think that those times, for my wife, were much longer than they were for me. Rather, in her case, I don't think they have ever passed. When, coming home, I told her the things the office ladies had been saying, she smiled bitterly and said, "Girls these days can be so cruel." For a while after that, I tried not to buy any more picture books or fairy tales.

As a result of today's meandering through the tenaciously sticky rain season precipitation, I had under my arm a technical book on the market development of fourth generation computers and a thin collection of essays entitled *The Jōmon Horse Fossils: Excavations and Research Findings up to the Present Day*. The title of the former I do not know, as it was a foreign book, and what I understand of the contents had been explained to me by a university student working in the bookstore part-time, who read the back cover.

With soaked umbrella in hand, I boarded the train, and was so absorbed in the unpleasantness of the humid atmosphere that I did not notice the ghost until around the

time the train passed Iidabashi Station. His face stuck out a half head above the crowd, so naturally I caught sight of him.

With one look, I was taken aback. It's not just a part of my job; I've always been the kind of person to have a good memory for people's faces. I immediately thought this was a young man I'd met before. When I say "met," in my case, it something to do with work. But he wasn't someone from the recent past. If I were to see I was sharing the train car with someone I'd met only a year or two ago, then before we'd passed even one station the alarm system I have in my head would have sensed it and warned me to change cars before he became aware of my presence. It wasn't something that happened very often, but I had heard those mental alarms go off several times before. Tokyo is not a small city, but it is overcrowded. And in my line of work, if you don't have an internal alarm system like mine, you can't do the job; it's that simple.

There were less than two yards separating the young man and myself, and although there was a crowd of passengers between us, we were standing directly opposite each other, face to face. Our heights were about the same, and his eyes and mine seemed to meet. I looked down hastily.

Who could it be? I asked myself, and pretending to wipe the sweat from my forehead, stole another glance. He was standing by the door, staring vacantly out through the window wet with fine drops of rain and clouded by the humanity inside the car. He looked like a college student, though from what I could see of his face I couldn't tell if he was headed to a professor's office, or extra lessons, or a date with his girlfriend. But like more than 80% of the passengers on the train running through the streets of Tokyo, he looked sleepy.

Soon the train arrived at Yotsuya Station. The crowd precariously maintaining their balance inside the car was jostled around by the stampede of passengers getting on and off the train. Even so, I never took my eyes off the young man. The door he was standing beside was open, and he pulled his body away from the people streaming in and, apparently standing on tiptoe, pushed his back against the handrail. Then, as if on some cue, he snorted, wrinkling up his nose—a childish mannerism out of character for someone his age. It was the sort of affectation you might see from an unskilled child actor cast as the brat in a television series.

That's right. I had seen that mannerism more than once, a long time before.

His appearance had changed dramatically. The line of his jaw was about the same as it had been then, but all in all he looked stronger, more masculine. The profile of his nose stood out more sharply. His face was dark with stubble. That was different, too. So was the healthy tone of his skin. The frail figure I had known lingered faintly only in the shape of his eyes and the set of his mouth.

When I had met him he was still a child; he was short enough then that I had to look down to talk to him. Maybe that's why I didn't recognize him right away.

As I covertly studied his face, the train pulled into Shinjuku Station. The young man, who had been leaning idly against the door, nimbly straightened up and led the way off the train. Spurred on by his ready agility, I followed him without thinking.

It wasn't as though I had any objective in mind. But it had suddenly occurred to me that he might have left so quickly because he had noticed me and was trying to get away. That was the kind of relationship we'd had—at least, from his perspective.

But actually, once we'd left the platform, his stride was not particularly hurried. Mixing in with the crowd, he headed for the east exit. He took no notice of me. I was relieved, but I was also disappointed.

Pushed and jostled by the crowd on the stairs, we walked toward the ticket gate, and in his retreating figure I saw his face as it looked in childhood. His face when I first met him....

Chapter 2:

It was five years ago.

An unusual prospective client visited our office.

It was a day almost exactly like today, with a fine mist of rain falling. The season then, however, was autumn, and even in long sleeves the weather was chilly. The pure white of the client's dress shirt stung my eyes, it was so cold.

"We're not allowed to wear our winter uniforms until winter term starts, so even though it's cold I can't wear a jacket," he said. His white shirt and dark blue tie were the uniform for the public middle school he was attending.

At the office I was working for at the time, in addition to ordinary investigations, we had established a slightly different category of enterprise: acting as bodyguards for ordinary civilians. Since our target market was almost entirely women, we called it an "escort service." To women who, for work-related reasons, often had to return home alone in the middle of the night—women in the late-night entertainment business,¹ or

¹ *Mizushōbai* (q.v. n4 in "The Ten-Year Plan").

those in computing or publishing who worked irregular hours, or bank staffers who had to serve excessive overtime hours during accounting periods—we marketed our services with the slogan “We guarantee the safety of you and your property on your way home.” Women hoping to avail themselves of our services were required to pay a yearly contractual fee of 50,000 yen, in addition to a charge of 5,000 yen each time we provided an escort.² A pair of our investigators, a man and a woman, were assigned to the service, and on the contracted date, at a prearranged time, they would meet the client at her workplace and escort her to her front door. As a general rule we used public transportation when escorting clients home, but those who desired could pay an extra fee to have their escorts ride along with them in their own car or a company care arranged for them—or so went the gist of the subpar pamphlets our office had printed.

I thought at the time, and still believe, that this plan was ten years ahead of itself. It’ll be another five years before it’s viable. By then, unless there are tighter restrictions imposed on public behavior in Tokyo like there are in other big cities, many people will realize that they’ll find no safety or public order on her streets. If you were to set forth this plan under those circumstances, you would be able to make a business of it very easily. For now, it was premature.

Just as I figured, in the year it took for our stubborn boss to (with much chagrin) announce the cancelation of our escort service, only two real clients had availed themselves of it. Though they might sometimes display doubtful abilities in mental arithmetic, almost all women in Tokyo carry a calculator that clearly spells out the raw numbers for them, and they were fully capable of crunching those numbers to arrive at

² The rule of thumb for dollar-yen exchange rates is one dollar to one hundred yen, which would make these fees \$500 annually and \$50 per escort.

the correct answer: if you were going to pay those ridiculously high prices to ride home on the last train with two guards, it would be much cheaper just to hail a taxi.

No matter how many retired police officers or martial arts masters you employed as staff, the market was still just too small to support a bodyguard business. When it was announced that our investigative office would return to its investigative duties, and this side business fell through, I was personally rather relieved. When you're a bodyguard it's expected that, if it comes down to it, you'll be ready to lay down your life to protect your client. That's what the Secret Service do. I watched the footage of the assassination attempt on President Reagan on the television news, and the first thing the Secret Service members around him did was not to try to wrestle down the man who had shot the president, but to form a human shield around him. It was as if to say, if you're going to shoot, shoot me. I'm not that brave, and if I really had to volunteer to be shot, even once, I think 5,000 yen would be too cheap a fee.

Although, for those reasons, our business plan fell flat in short order, our pamphlets were still circulating for quite a while. Owing to the exotic nature of a personal escort service, when we launched it, some press came to do a story on us. That's probably how information about it was still available. The ninth grader³ who came to our office as a prospective client said immediately on reaching the first desk that he wanted to hire a personal escort and that he had read about our service in a weekly magazine. He knew how much we charged, too.

He seemed like a rather meek boy, so we thought it might be better for a female investigator to talk to him, but we only had the two of them and at the time they were

³ Third-year middle school student in the Japanese system.

both out on other cases. The three of us left hanging around the office with nothing to do played rock-paper-scissors for it, and since I lost I had to take charge of him.

There was nowhere else to sit, so for the time being I took him to the reception room. He took a seat and sat quite straight, without fidgeting. I remember thinking that not even when they're called to the principal's office are kids these days so well-behaved.

At our office, we didn't make a practice of inquiring about the client's name or position this early in the visit. "I understand you desire our escort service," I began.

He nodded affirmatively.

"Unfortunately, that service has been discontinued."

I didn't have a great deal of company loyalty. My boss wasn't particularly fond of me.

"We didn't turn a profit on it, so we dropped it. Did you come here for someone in your family?"

At that, he lifted his downcast gaze and answered. "No, I'm the one who wants protection."

For a moment I said nothing, looking at him intently. Even if you weren't particularly gifted in deduction, if you looked at the boy you could guess quickly enough what brought him here. But just to be certain, I asked.

"What is it you want to be protected from?"

Silence.

"From your classmates?"

I'd hit the nail on the head. He was being bullied at school.

Chapter 3:

When I managed to drag the story out of him, it turned out to be the kind of thing you could only call “bullying” if you were forced to sum it in a single word. In reality, what had happened to this boy was closer to a crime: assault and extortion. In the past three months, it had suddenly escalated to the point that, all told, they had stripped him of about 100,000 yen. The group tormenting him was made up of students from various grade levels and classes, but among them was a boy who had been his classmate since elementary school.

“So you’ve been bullied since grade school?”

“Yes.”

“And always by this group, I suppose?”

“Always.”

“Are you their only target?”

“There are others, but I get it the worst.”

The reason he had thought to hire an escort service was that his fellow students often ambushed him on his way home from school and took his money or beat him up.

“They don’t do that on school grounds, do they?”

“It’s not like it never happens, but they’re worried a teacher might catch them.”

“Is there a teacher they’re afraid of? If there is, you could go to him for help.

Why don’t you discuss the problem with him?”

“That wouldn’t help. These guys aren’t afraid of the teachers; they’re just worried it’ll wind up on their permanent record. Even if a teacher catches on, they just go, ‘Oh, is something wrong?’ and play dumb about it, and the teacher lets it go.”

“Don’t like to make waves, do they, your teachers?”⁴

The boy let out a sigh like an old man—surprising for one so young. “I got the short straw in life. So I have to look out for myself, I guess.”

I was at a loss for words for a moment.

“By ‘short straw,’ you mean somebody had to play the loser, and it got pushed on you?”

“Well, yeah. Those guys don’t have much other fun stuff to do. School’s boring for everybody, but we all put up with it ‘cause we have our futures to think about. But those guys just can’t take it; they don’t have the patience. So they’re looking for something to take it out on, and I guess they just happened to see me.”

In a human being’s long life, adolescence is the time when both one’s sense of inferiority and of self-importance are at their strongest. Behind this boy’s sober explanation was a resignation to the idea that he was a hopeless case for having been singled out, but also a firm self-confidence supporting his efforts to accept that resignation. Those guys can only lash out at others, he was saying, but I’m different.

Of course bullying is, by definition, aggression without reason, but in his case that self-confidence he was hiding, the self-confidence that did not come through in his words, may only have added fuel to the fire.

“I bet you get good grades.”

⁴ *Kotonakaresugi* refers to a philosophy of keeping the peace at any cost.

“They’re all right.”

I was silent. No matter how hard I tried, I really had no clue where to begin.

“Well, the truth is, I don’t have any children.”

The boy stared at me blankly. It wasn’t that my not having children was strange, but rather, his eyes seemed to ask how that had anything to do with him.

“It’s just that I know almost nothing about what schools are like now, or what the realities of the bullying problem are. Well, I know there have been a lot of unpleasant incidents related to bullying in schools. I’ve seen that much on the news. But I’ve got no real feel for the situation. I can appreciate that you’re in a tough situation, but I don’t know what kind of advice I should give you. Even if we were still in the business of providing escorts, I’m really not sure if we would be willing to take you on as a client or not.”

“Why not?” the boy asked.

I had a practical objection in mind, but I didn’t dare ask him how, if we were to take his case, he was going to pay us. Whether they know it or not, kids these days are rich.⁵ And this boy had already been taken for 100,000 yen. That wasn’t the kind of money his parents would have gladly parted with. And it wasn’t a small enough sum that they could have overlooked their son taking it out of the house without saying anything.

Instead, I broached my second question.

“Well, I’m wondering whether our involvement wouldn’t just make the situation worse. It might provoke your bullies into being more aggressive.”

⁵ *Senzaiteki ni kanemochi* literally means “latently rich people,” the suggestion being that they have vast stores of untapped wealth.

The boy responded so quickly it was as though he was throwing my words back at me. “It can’t get any worse than it is now.”

I had no ammunition to fire back, so all I could do was fold my arms over my chest.

“If you’re going to tell me to talk to my teachers, I’ve done that,” he continued. “But it didn’t change anything. It’s just like I told you.”

“You’ve already tried?”

“Yeah. After that, they stopped bothering me at school. Now they jump me on my way home from school, or force their way into my house, or call me out on the phone instead.”

“Do your parents know about this?”

“They don’t know anything. I haven’t told them. Both of them work, and they’re very busy.”

“Busy or not, if it’s for their son, I think they’ll make the time. Talk to them.”

The boy shook his head vigorously. “Both my parents are doctors. They’re responsible for the lives of their patients; they can’t put aside their work just like that.”

O ye physicians of the nation, present and to come, I humbly beseech you to heed those noble words. Stifling my sarcasm, I replied, “It’s admirable that you would give such serious consideration to your parents’ work responsibilities, but in this case they might find it insulting.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, it’s presumptuous. By assuming that your parents are too busy to help you, you’re underestimating them, passing judgment on their abilities.”

“I’m not underestimating them...”

“So talk to them. That’s the first thing you should do. If you’re still no better off and your parents can’t think of any other way to help you, then as a stopgap solution you can come back here and consult with me about whether there are steps we can take to keep you safe when you’re by yourself. How’s that?”

If my boss had known what I was up to, he’d have a few choice words for me: just what the hell was I thinking, suggesting all of this on my own? But at the time, I couldn’t bring myself to dismiss him with a simple “go talk to your parents.” The chances were one in a thousand, or ten thousand, but I thought maybe, just maybe this boy really did need protection.

And to tell the truth, behind my willingness to help him was the shrewd calculation that, posse or not, I’d be protecting him from what was merely a group of children, and I wouldn’t have to risk my life like some Secret Service agent.

Even now, I can remember that exchange vividly. The boy took a hard look right through me and saw that calculation with frightening accuracy. It was as if I had “just kid stuff” written on my necktie for him to read.

He began to untie his own cheap blue necktie. “What are you doing?” I asked, but he made no reply as he untucked his shirt and started to unbutton it.

“I wanted to show you,” he said.

And he opened his shirt to expose his thin chest.

There were bruises. Not just one or two. They were various sizes, but one of the blood-red marks along his ribcage was eight inches long.

“They didn’t do that with their bare hands, did they?” I managed to ask at last.
He shook his head.

“No, with a nightstick.”

“A nightstick? Like the ones beat cops carry?”

“Yep.”

“You can’t get those just anywhere.”

“They sell them at police supply stores. If you have the money, even a middle school students can buy them. That’s what Takagi said.”

“Takagi? Is he a member of the gang?”

“He’s like the boss. I went to grade school with that guy.”

He buttoned up his shirt and gave a weak little laugh. “Like I said, I got the short straw.”

It was at that moment that I seriously thought I could help this boy. So for the first time I asked for his name and address, and the name of his school.

“Changed your mind after you saw my bruises?” he asked, sensing my attitude had shifted.

“Have you showed them to your teachers?”

“Yeah, but I already told you it didn’t do any good.”

As I was writing down his name in my notebook, I said, “You know, I used to be a policeman.”

The boy blinked rapidly in surprise. For the first time he looked very young.
“For real?”

“Yeah. It’s been almost ten years since I resigned.”

“You weren’t old enough to retire, though, right?”

“Well a lot of things happened, and I quit.”

“Did you get in a fight?”

“If you want to call it that, I guess. Sure, it was a fight. But the work wasn’t the problem; I liked being a policeman. That’s why I let it get to me sometimes. I’m a stubborn guy, and I let the job get to me. You said before that this gang used a nightstick. Could it have been a toy one?”

I said to myself, the nightstick is the embodiment of the policeman’s will to protect and serve. How could they have twisted that to this heinous end?

“Tonight, I think I should call your family. If need be, I’ll pay you a visit. Just as a private citizen who used to be a policeman.”

“Why?”

“First of all, I want to pressure you into talking to your parents, regardless of how things go.”

The boy lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“For another thing, I’m concerned about how this situation will play out from now on.”

But I had no need to be concerned about that, as I found out later that night, after he’d left the office. Once I thought I’d given him enough time to talk to his parents, I called them myself. The voice that answered was that of a tape recorder: “The number you have reached is no longer in service...”

Chapter 4:

In describing my state in those days, my wife said, “You worried yourself crazy.”

The fact is, I searched desperately for that boy. But I had no leads. The name he’d given me, the address, the phone number, they were all bogus. Only the middle school he’d told me he attended turned out to exist, but none of their students matched his description. With only his school information to go on—white shirt, blue pants, blue tie, and not a single school crest anywhere—he could have given me the name of any old middle school.

I thought that by that token he’d indicated he wanted nothing to do with me. That’s why he’d given me a fake name. That’s why he’d lied about his address. If that was all it was, it didn’t bother me. But his situation was still the same, and it might even have been serious enough that his life was in danger. Even if I couldn’t help him, I felt a pressing need to know whether his problem had been solved, and whether or not he was physically safe. I even felt that, having heard his story, I had a right to know how it ended.

I’d been chewed out by my boss and laughed at by my coworkers. But I still couldn’t give up on the case. Wasn’t there even the slightest clue I’d missed? I scoured my memories of the boy and our conversation, and every time I thought I’d remembered something new I was off on another wild goose chase.

Three months passed that way. During these three months, I felt like my feet had been nailed to the floor as I went over those same memories over and over again. I’d resigned from the force because I’d been having trouble and getting into conflicts at work, so after I’d started working as a private investigator I hadn’t called in any personal favors from my former colleagues. That was my own stubborn pride.

But this was different. This wasn't about me; this, I'd convinced myself, was a matter of life and death for a child, if a complete stranger. And so, when I finally dialed that number I'd stopped calling so long ago, it was because I'd realized that over the course of those three months I'd been driven to the verge of spiritual starvation.

The man I called was currently the sergeant in charge of the investigation of violent crimes, but his background was in the Juvenile Unit, and he was a veteran in the field, with years of experience. I became worried as, time after time, he didn't answer. When at last I got his voice on the other end, he said, "Well, let's get together over a drink and I'll listen to your story. When's good for you?" But I cut him off and said, "Fine, we can do that later, but right here, right now, I need your opinion on this."

I explained everything to him. He listened quietly, asking no questions and making only terse replies to show he understood, and when I had finished talking, he said, "Just tell me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Those bruises on the kid's body—did they look like the real deal? Looking back on it now, thinking objectively, could you say for sure they were? Sure enough to testify, in a court of law, that you really saw honest-to-God bruises there?"

I had asked myself the same thing more than once, so I replied without hesitation.

"I'm sure. I can still see them perfectly. Those were real bruises, all right."

On the other end of the line, he seemed to ponder this a while. There was the flick of a lighter. After about the time it took him to smoke half a cigarette, he replied.

"I think the kid's telling the truth."

"Yeah?"

“But he may have embellished some of the details. Like the part about the nightstick. Maybe he freaked out when he heard you used to be a cop because he figured you’d be able to tell they weren’t the kind of injuries you get from those.”

“I really couldn’t say.”

“The bit about the parents being doctors is probably bull, too. ‘Responsible for the lives of their patients?’ Give me a break. No fourteen- or fifteen-year-old kid says that and means it. Probably his folks just don’t pay that much attention to him—they’re a sorry couple of wage-slaves, or he doesn’t get along with them, or something like that. The real problem is, those bruises were bad enough to scare you, weren’t they? No matter how hard a kid tried to hide injuries like that, any normal parents would’ve noticed them a long time ago. Even more so if they were really doctors. Considering that, I’d say my deduction’s on the mark.”

“You’re telling me he lied because he didn’t want to admit he doesn’t get along with his parents?”

“For a kid, that’s a big deal. Or maybe he wishes it was true. ‘Gee, if only my parents were doctors,’ that kind of thing,” he said in his low, rumbling voice. “Now, as for your concern about his present situation, I’d bet he’s not nearly as bad off as he was when he came to see you.”

“Why not?” I asked, clutching the receiver.

“Probably already talked to his folks. And showed them his bruises, of course.”

“How do you know?”

“Because the way I see it, he was using you as a practice run.”

“Practice?”

“Yeah. I think you were practice, not an experiment. The kid knows communication with his parents isn’t going well. As bad as his bruises were, he was able to hide them with the barest amount of effort, and they were none the wiser. And there’s no sign they caught him taking money from them, either. Nobody asked him about any of it.”

He’s probably right, I thought.

“As it stood, his situation was rapidly getting worse. There was no way out. There was nothing he could do to save himself. He decided to confide in his parents. But at that point he was struck with a terrible fear: if he tells them the truth, will they believe him in the end? ‘Is my story convincing?’ he wonders. ‘Will it move my parents?’”

For a while, I could say nothing. That was crazy. Anyone who had seen those bruises would have believed him.

“I know it’s hard to believe when I say it up front like that. But things like that do happen. And if you imagine how he feels, it’s not so hard. That would-be client of yours was in pain, in need, and in fear every single day, living a life of despair, but when he looked at his parents he saw no indication that they even noticed. With that in mind, he thought that getting them to understand how he was suffering would be no easy task. The longer he hid it the more serious things got, and the more serious things got the more he thought they wouldn’t understand, and he’d clam up all over again. It was a vicious cycle. ‘They probably won’t believe me,’ he tells himself. ‘They definitely won’t believe me. They’ll say, “if this was really going on, why didn’t you say something sooner?” What’ll I do if they say my story’s ridiculous?’”

I closed my eyes. It’s true....

“He was desperate, wracking his brain to come up with a way to get out of this mess on his own. And he hit upon an idea: to run to a complete stranger, no kith or kin, and test to see if he’d be believed or not... at least, I think it’s something like that. So you weren’t an experiment—you were practice. And judging by how you reacted, practice went very well. So he probably moved on to the real show. By now he’s either escaped from his predicament completely or he’s getting out of it as we speak.”

“Unless his parents are complete jackasses.”

“Well, don’t worry about that. I’m sure it’s fine. If nothing else, at the last minute, parental instincts’ll kick in. I’ve seen it happen myself all the time.”

You made for good practice, he said. You’ve done your job. You can forget about it now—and you should. What happens after that, that is. That’s what he said before he hung up the phone. By I wasn’t very good at forgetting about it. I’d been much better at being practice....

And now, five years later, the frail ninth grader covered in bruises appeared before my eyes as a young man, grown to about my height. His legs, longer than mine, hurried toward the gate at the east exit of Shinjuku Station.

In the end, I followed him, but I didn’t think I would be able to speak to him. I didn’t know what to say. Thinking that I would like to hear his voice one way or another, I trotted after him. In the midst of the crowd, all of a sudden, the young man raised his hand.

When I looked in that direction, on the other side of the gate, there was a young woman, all alone, waving to him. She was in a pale blue dress, and her hair was short. He waved back and darted toward the turnstile.

I hurried after him and went through the automatic turnstile. The smiling couple drew close and walked together toward the station exit.

“I’m awfully late, huh,” he said. His voice was much deeper than the one I remembered, and it had a warm timbre to it.

“It’s all right. They never start playing on time anyway. This time they were like, an hour late. Couldn’t do their whole set.”

“For real?”

When I heard that voice ask “for real?” I knew instinctively that I was right. There was no mistake. It really was him. It was the same tone he’d used as a middle school student, five years ago.

At that moment, perhaps sensing my presence, he looked back. Our eyes met straight on, and we were face to face. But he immediately turned his gaze away and drifted toward the crowd overflowing the turnstiles.

“It’s seriously crowded. This heat’s got me bushed,” he said to the girl.

I forgave him.

I stopped following the two of them and stood still, watching his figure as it moved further and further away. They looked good together. She was no great beauty, but she was the girl-next-door type, and she looked pleasant and cheerful.

You solved your problem, then, I said to his disappearing back. And it's already become just a thing of the past. In the end, I was able to give you what you were looking for. And now, because of that, you can walk with your lover, side by side.

I wasn't angry. But I didn't feel like laughing out loud, either. All I felt was sweaty and thirsty.

I looked at my wristwatch and visualized the timetable for the Chuo Rapid Line. If I didn't phone home, my detour might be mistaken for something more serious. I shook my head and retraced my steps to the turnstile. I'd go home and tell my wife about this. While we talked, we'd drink beer together. That would be his thank-you gift to me. But I would have to discount that gift a little because he hadn't remembered me.

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